Give Us Cable

As the Lafayette Parish Council considered whether Telecable Associations should be required to extend cable TV service to more rural areas, Constellation Leondard Bronseau noted that the very people affected by the debate wouldn’t be able to use the Acadiana Open Channel. The community open access channel, after all, is only available on cable.

With the new franchise agreement, they aren’t likely to see it anytime soon. But given the speed with which the cable industry is developing and changing, insulas is a bit optimistic.

The Telecable Association has long held the only franchise in the parish, and complaints about service have been widespread. With the new franchise agreement approved last week, TCA officials have again promised to improve service. However, customers have been disappointed as a new system was installed during the summer and the cable company largely advertised that fast. But, according to Bronseau, the system was damaged by lightning shortly after and signs in the system have only recently been worked out. According to his figures, from Nov. 4 to Dec. 4, 95 percent of the homes on the new system were measured in 10 seconds or less, and cable clearances have new requirements to keep customers from being placed on hold for long periods.

The sticking point when the agreement came to the Parish Council was the lack of service to the entire parish. According to TCA figures, 95 percent of the unincorporated areas of the parish are currently serviced by cable. However, 872 residents still do not have cable hook-ups. TCA officials insist that it is not economically feasible to run cable lines to the unserved homes. Bronseau says it would cost $2 million, which would have to be passed on to customers.

"You can’t justify raising our rates to everybody who lives in the city and everybody who lives in the parish to accommodate somebody who chooses to live 25 miles out in the woods," he says.

Nevertheless, Bronseau, whose district contains most of the unserved residents, claimed that the service requirement dropped to 18 homes per mile or 10 confirmed customers. The suggestion didn’t get far, as Bronseau noted that the city didn’t give much in return. But this gave him a slight edge in the discussion. TCA officials refused to consider a franchise fee and asked for an agreement at the last minute.

However, there is a possibility that another cable company, Allen Cable of Morgan City, could be servicing most of the unincorporated part of the parish to be economically feasible. Allen Cable isn’t the first company to express an interest in Lafayette Parish, but it has an advocate in State Rep. Raymond "LaLa" Lalone, who has been contacted by residents in his district asking for service.

Lalone didn’t press the point at last week’s Parish Council meeting because he said he didn’t want to interfere with the TCA contract, but Allen Cable has lined up suits right up against the Lafayette City-Lafayette Parish line and are closer to at least one location than TCA’s.

Bronseau TCA, which does not have an exclusive franchise in Lafayette Parish, wouldn’t be entitled to another company seeking a franchise as long as parish and city governments applied the same terms as they do to TCA.

One town in St. Landry Parish that wouldn’t get service took things into its own hands. Since last year, the town of Palmetto has purchased a municipally owned cable service. "We had to do it," Palmetto Mayor Harold Bronseau said. Palmetto’s population is about 230, and cable service isn’t available and won’t be economically feasible to bring cable to the village. According to Palmetto’s public relations officer, Allen Cable’s service is not practical, but his company is not ready to give up on Palmetto’s customers, he says Palmetto is trying to make money, only improve, and extend its service. Palmetto’s was able to issue $100,000 in certificates of indebtedness at a lower interest rate than a business would have gotten, and SLEMCO gave the town a break on the use of its utility poles, says Taylor. The company serves about 250 customers and is making a small profit. However, as basic rates are considerably higher than Lafayette city customers pay, $19.95 monthly for 12 channels versus $18.

Service is handled by a part-time employee with the assistance of contractors for major problems. There have been complaints about service, but service usually, says Taylor, but no for the municipalities service is not high.

"We haven’t heard too much yet, but let’s put it this way."

The new Lafayette Parish agreement was not only with the stage for similar changes when the city’s franchise agreement comes up for renewal, but it comes at a time when the
federal government is looking hard at re-regulating the cable industry. Since the
industry was deregulated in 1984, both the
industry and customers complained about service and cost of cable TV and separate
complaints about service have escalated nationally.
Because of deregulation, local govern-
ments have little control over the opera-
tion of cable companies, and can’t do anything
about rates.
A study by the United
States Telephone Asso-
ciation showed substan-
tial price hikes in Louisi-
am cities between 1986
and 1989 for basic ser-
vice: 91 percent for
Lafayette, 223 percent
for Shreveport, 87 percent
for New Orleans, 53 per-
cent for Baton Rouge and
51 percent for Lake
Charles.
was one of the chief spon-
sors of congressional
legislation in the last ses-
sion that would have put
some regulation back on
the cable industry. The
bill died in the U.S. Sen-
date during the last week of the session
after the White House organized an effort
to kill it, Tauzin says. He says the White
House opposed the bill on the grounds
that it was regulatory and anti-competition,
but in fact the bill would have in-
creased competition among cable com-
panies.
The major regulation was against rapid
rate increases. Basic service would have
been required to be kept low. There were
several provisions affecting satellite TV
service and accommodations for develop-
ments, according to Tauzin.
Most customers nationally are against
large cable companies which are “the only
store in town,” Tauzin says. Smaller, locally
owned companies usually have more local
accountability to customers and govern-
ments.

The Federal Commu-
nications Commission is
expected to propose a new
rule allowing community
regulation of cable rates.
In some cases, Tauzin also
says supporters of the
congressional legislation
will try again.
But even competition in a community doesn’t
create the perfect market.
Last year the city of Eunice approved a
second franchise for a fledgling cable company
that was locally owned.
Now, according to
Mayor Curtis Joubert, the
city has been asked to
settle a dispute between
the two companies. The
locally owned company
has charged that the es-
tablished company is competing unfairly
by offering coupons only to residents in
neighborhoods where the new company is
trying to launch its service. An attorney
is researching the matter, but Joubert says
it’s one of a series of competitive issues
that should be regulated on the federal
level and not have to be dealt with by a
small community government.
But, he says, competition has been good
for the price of cable service in Eunice.
“The consumer is probably coming out
the winner.”